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ART OF THE FAR EAST

LANDSCAPES FLOWERS ANIMALS

16 PLATES IN COLOUR FROM THE WORK OF
OLD CHINESE AND JAPANESE MASTERS

INTRODUCTION BY LAURENCE BINYON

IRIS COLOUR BOOKS
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THE IRIS COLOUR BOOKS

EDITOR: DR. HANS ZBINDEN

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INTRODUCTION

The Exhibition of the year 1936 at Burlington House has made the English public aware of the general character of Chinese art. What must have especially struck those who came to Chinese painting for the first time is the choice of themes; for instead of a preponderance of figure-subjects, as in European painting, the actions and occupations of mankind inspire the Chinese artists less frequently than the world outside humanity,—not only the landscape setting, the streams and woods and mountains, but the life of animals, of birds, of insects, of flowers, all considered as themes of a dignity equal to that of the human form. It is with such subjects that the paintings selected by Dr. Otto Fischer and Dr. Hans Zbinden and here reproduced, are concerned.

Chinese paintings have been for centuries collected with enthusiasm in Japan, and Japanese collections are notably rich in this respect, especially in works of the Sung period. These collections were represented at Burlington House by only a very few specimens; and as the examples here reproduced are taken from collections belonging to temples or private owners in Japan, those who visited the Exhibition may be glad to supplement their memories of it with pictures of great beauty and importance such as these. To the Chinese examples have been added two by Japanese artists, continuing the Chinese tradition.

The landscape with two sages (Plate I) has been for centuries attributed to the greatest master of the T'ang dynasty and reputedly the greatest of all Chinese painters, Wu Tao-tzu. It is one of a pair. Tough no longer regarded as an eighth-century work, it is a classic example of ink-painting. More striking is the famous "Waterfall" (Plate II). Here again we have a traditional association with another eighth-century master, Wang Wei, poet and physician as well as painter; and if, as is now generally thought, this

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Waterfall is of later date, it is at any rate the kind of picture which Wang Wei is known to have painted, for he was the founder of the school which preferred to choose a single theme from nature and concentrate on communicating the force of an overwhelming impression on the mind, as here it is the weight and rush of water falling between rocks.

Next we come to a group of paintings typical of the Sung dynasty (10th to 13th centuries), when so great a school of landscape flourished. The landscapes were mostly painted in ink; if colour was added, it was sober and discreet; for there was no idea of making a portrait of a place or recording the sunlit, surface aspect of a scene: the aim was rather to evoke the emotion felt by the artist in the presence of Nature, the impression not on the eye alone but on the mind through the eye, and with this aim in view any stress on local colour seemed an irrelevant distraction. Moreover the gay and brilliant aspects of nature appealed less to these artists than the mountain solitudes, where poets and sages loved to wander, removed from the cares of the world and living the life of contemplation.

In the later part of the Sung period the more impressionist style becomes more frequent. But in the beautiful example reproduced on Plate VII, slight as seems the means employed, there is a sort of fullness and depth behind all the economy of brush-stroke. Each touch is perfectly in its place; for the whole has been conceived in the mind before a stroke was laid on the absorbent silk. But besides the mental concentration implicit in such a painting, where the sure confidence of the touch is half disguised by its sensitive delicacy, there is the accomplishment of long training. The painters of China have not, like the painters of Europe, thrown away their technical inheritance; each learns from his predecessors; and each great master has advanced the knowledge of the way in which the elements of a scene may be presented to the eye with convincing effect. An elaborate code of conventions is thus established, and a variety of formed styles from which to choose. If this has its weak side, a tendency to imitate the past and rely on a formula, it has the great advantage that the painter does not exhaust his energy on problems of representation; having mastered a certain language, a certain idiom, he

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is all the more free to concentrate on the expression of his intimate emotion. In the earlier part of the Sung dynasty there is apt to be less of emotional expression, more of actual fact (Plate V) but in the "Lake Shore" by Hsia Kuei (Plate VI), one of the greatest painters of the later part of the period, there is a perfect balance between the technical mastery and the communication of a mood. Hsia Kuei is the author of the long roll the "River of a Myriad Miles" which attracted so much attention in the Exhibition at Burlington House.

The two flower-pieces, the "Lotuses" attributed to the 10th century painter Hsü Hsi and the "White Hibiscus" by Li Ti, no less than the "White Heron" also attributed to Hsü Hsi, reveal the Chinese feeling for the life of flowers and birds. It is as if we were admitted to share for the moment that life, which is not regarded from the outside for the opportunity it gives of a decorative motive, still less with a scientific interest, though decoration and observation are both present. At the same time there is a felicity, even a kind of grandeur, of design such as European artists would have thought the human figure alone to be worthy of providing.

Chao Mēng-fu's picture (Plate VIII), with its great pine tree dominating the design and the figure of the poet focussing the mood of the artist, continues the Sung tradition of landscape. And Yen Hui, also of the 14th century, shows his romantic genius in the small album-painting—how concentrated in expressiveness!—of a traditional motive, "The Moon over Raging Waves" (Plate IX).

Next comes a typical example of the early Ming style (Plate X), richly decorative, less "inward" in its conception than the Sung; and this style is also admirably represented by Lü Chi's "Pheasant and Flowering Trees"; while of Ming landscape Tai Wen-Cin's "Sleeping Fisherman", in the half-humorous vein so often found in China's art, is a delightful specimen.

Chen Nan-P'ing's "Deer in the Woods" forms a link between the later Chinese tradition and the eighteenth-century art of Japan, for this painter spent some years at Nagasaki and had great influence on the Japanese painters who followed the Chinese style. The

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"Monkeys" of Mori Sosen (Plate XV), an artist who lived for a time in the woods that he might understand the life of these animals, represents the naturalistic school of Kyoto; marvellously observed, it preserves also a fine sense of design. The earlier painting, now in the British Museum and attributed to Ritsuo, famous also for his pottery, "Birds on a Camellia in Snow" (Plate XIV) shows the old Chinese intimacy of feeling for such subjects, with no slavish following of tradition and with a fresh idiom.

LAURENCE BINYON.

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II. Ascribed to WANG WEI (China c. 698—759), but earlier than the X—XI century: WATERFALL.

III. HSŪ HSI (China X. century): LOTUS FLOWERS IN THE WIND.

VI. HSŪ HSI (China X. century): ARCTIC HERON ON FROST-COVERED BRANCH.

V. LI TI (Chinac. 1130—1180): HUNTER RETURNING HOME IM THE SNOW.

VI. HSIA KUEI (China c. 1180—1230): LAKE SHORE IN MOUNTAINOUS COUNTRY.

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XII. LŪCHIH (China c. 1500): PAIR OF PHEASANTS UNDER CAMELLIAS AND PLUM-BLOSSOM.

XIII. CHEN NAN-P'ING (China XVIII. century, from 1731—1733 in Nagasaki): DEER IN PINE WOOD.

XIV. RITSU O (Japan 1662—1747): BIRDS IN THE SNOW ON A CAMELLIA BRANCH.

XV. MORI SOSEN (Japan 1749—1821): TWO MONKEYS.

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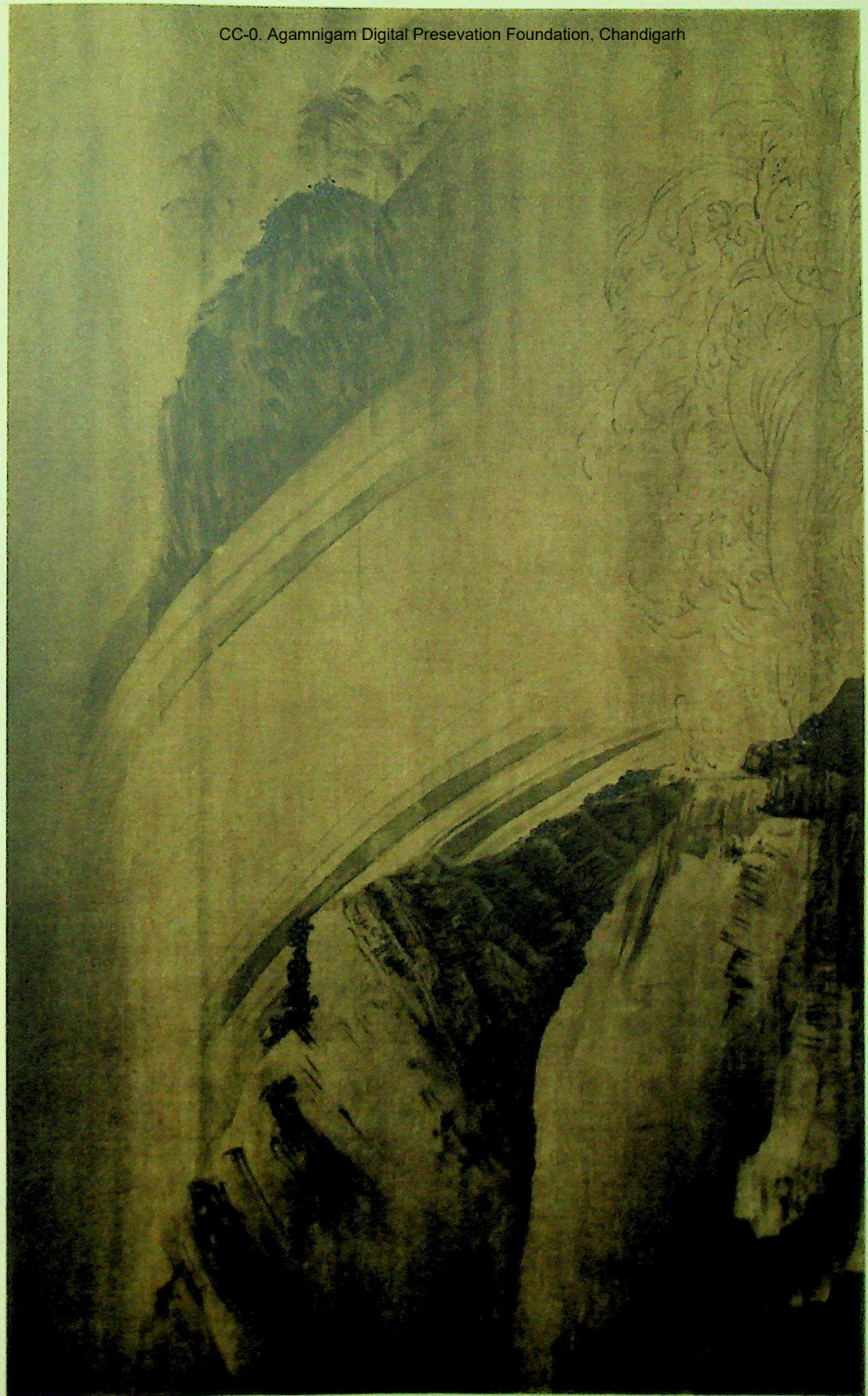

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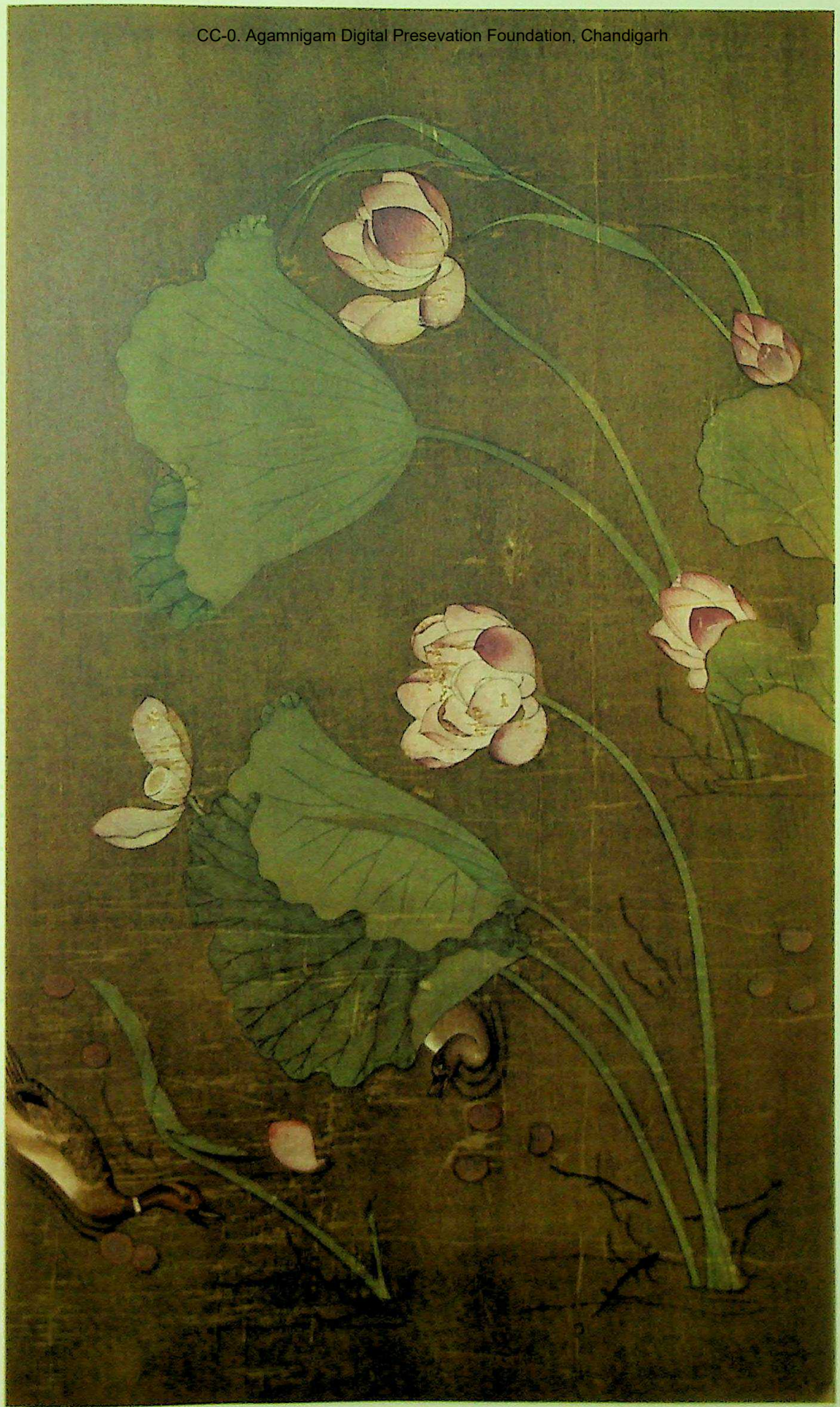

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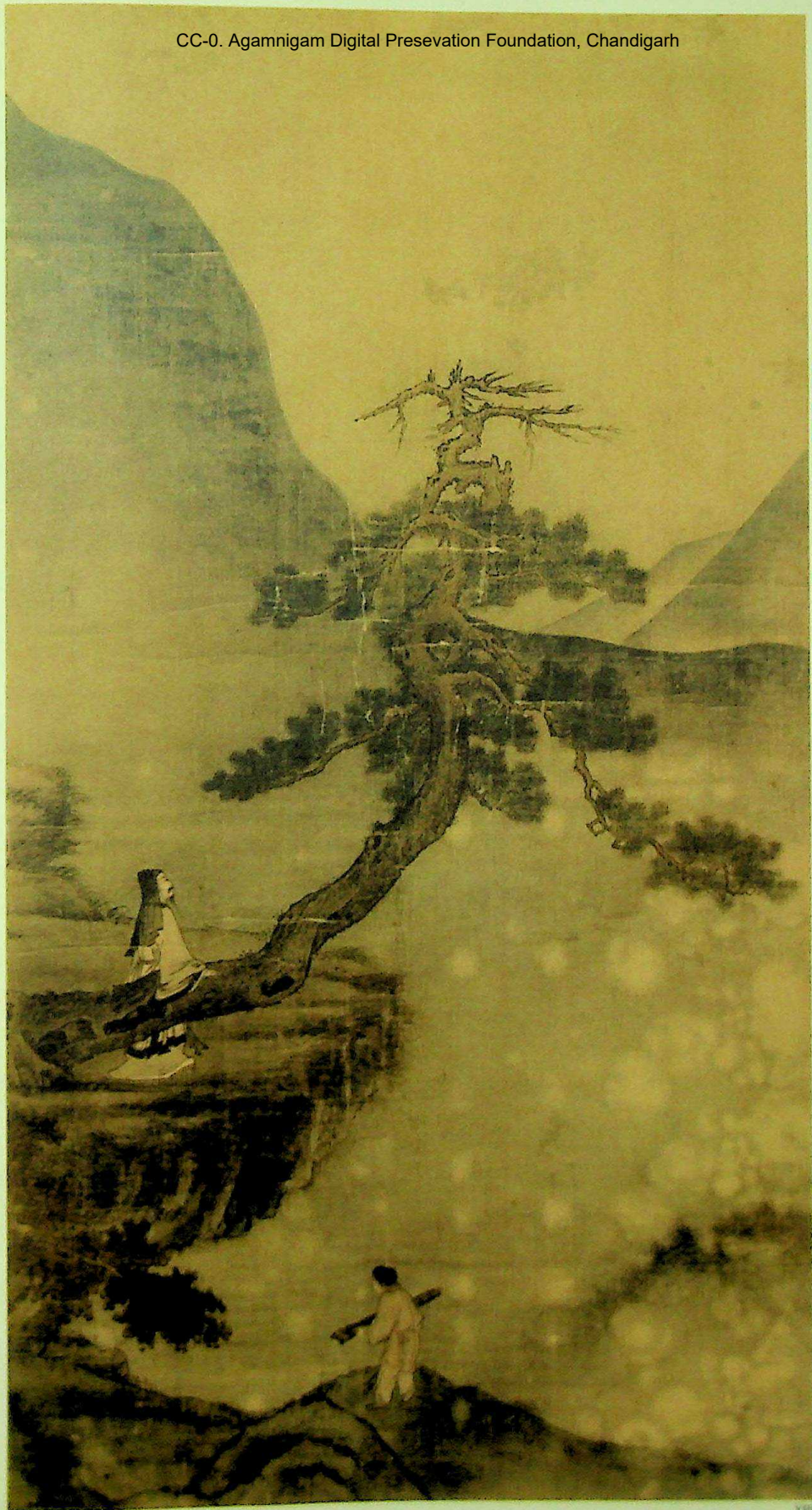

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